

**A Repentent Lent
Repent and Trust
Mark 1:9-15**

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Port Williams United Baptist Church
First Sunday of Lent, 2021**

In those days....

In those days John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Proclaiming a baptism for the repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Let that sit for a moment.

But just a moment, because this is Mark's telling of the Great Story and he doesn't tarry long anywhere. He has places to go and a story to tell. We need to catch a moment when we can.

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness.

Out there.

Away from the glitz and glamour of the city.

Away from all the beautiful people, away from all the wonderful business projects. John appeared in the wilderness, as if from out of nowhere. He appeared with a new and different message, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

As we heard just a few weeks ago his message was different. Everyone knew that if you wanted your sins forgiven you went to see a priest, at the temple. That is where you went! They had the monopoly on forgiveness of sin. To suggest anything different, well...

But here was John out in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism for the forgiveness of sin, and people were pouring out to see him. They were coming from Jerusalem and the suburbs and the whole countryside. They were coming to hear this strange little preacher and to be baptized by him, confessing their sins.

And we read:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

It doesn't seem that strange for us. We have heard this story before. Matthew and Luke tell it, John has a version, so it is easy for us to think that Jesus was just in the area. He was just following the crowd.

But we are told he came from Nazareth in Galilee. Imagine he came to Port Williams from Annapolis Royal. By foot. This isn't something you do on a whim. It was done with intention, purpose. Jesus came to the wilderness, to John, to connect himself with the message John was proclaiming, a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

Sit with that for a minute.

For what sins did Jesus need to repent?

Jesus tied himself to the message of John, and to the prophets that had gone before.
"I will send one who will prepare the way."

Jesus was baptized, immersed into the muddy water of the Jordan, and before he could quit spitting the water out, before he could dry his eyes he heard that affirming voice from heaven.

This is the first event in Mark's gospel. He doesn't give us a genealogy tracing Jesus lineage back to the birth of time. He doesn't give us a birth story with shepherds or wise men. He doesn't give us an escape to Egypt, a journey as a child to Jerusalem. No, for Mark the Jesus story begins in the waters of baptism.

Baptism is the beginning. It is not graduation, the reward for doing well in class. It is not having all the right answers. It is not initiation, something we HAVE to do to get in the club. It is not even washing away all the wrong that we have done before, or an assurance that we won't sin again. Just in case the story is told that the emperor Constantine was baptized with his right arm, the arm that held his sword, out of the water. He'd get to that later!

No baptism is the outward sign that we have chosen to unite ourselves with the one in whose name we are baptized. And we are all baptized into something, aren't we? Some churches baptized infants, claiming them for God, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. As a chaplain in a hospital I was asked to baptize infants that had been stillborn, her parents wanting the reassurance that she was with God.

I have been continually surprised by parents who have no connection with the church who want their infant baptized, dedicated, confirmed—you choose the word. We want, need to know that our children are claimed by God.

Because of our deep commitment to soul freedom, to the belief that no one can make that choice for you, we don't baptize infants. That is something you have to choose on your own. Oh, we will help you. We will share our experience with you, give you some idea of what it means. We will share our experience. That is what we are going to be doing in our Inquirer's Class beginning March 7. We will try to help you, but ultimately it is up to you. You have to choose to go into the water. You have to choose to follow Jesus. You have to choose to join your story with the Jesus story. You have to choose to leave Nazareth, where you have been comfortable, at home, and be a part of the Jesus adventure.

And it is an adventure!

As soon as his feet touched dry land, before he could even get dry, he was driven into the wilderness. He was driven into the wilderness by the Spirit. That same spirit that had descended on him like a dove just a few minutes before. That same spirit who had proclaimed God's love for him, God's pride in him—that same spirit drove him into the wilderness!

This was not a drive in a new Land Rover to go camping in the outback. It was not a drive to the dark sky area near Kiji. No the spirit drove him, ran him out! Jesus didn't want to go! This is the same word that Mark uses when Jesus drives out the money changers from the temple. It is a word filled with passion, bordering on violence. We don't go to the wilderness voluntarily.

But where did he go? Mark says that John was already in the wilderness. Jesus had come to him in the wilderness. But now he is driven even further into the wilderness? It reminds us that Moses discovered the burning bush in the area beyond the wilderness. There are times when we find ourselves way way out there, don't we. Without wifi, without prayer-fi. We are out there.....all alone.

Historically when we have seen images of this story we see the desert. That dry, arid land that is all brown and orange. No water to be found. It is a place where Satan and wild beast thrive, a place of spiritual and physical danger.

But was he in the desert?

Or did he find himself in Jerusalem. Surrounded not by nothing, but by so much, by so many. So many dangers. So many temptations.

I remember going to my cousin's wedding in New Orleans when I was 16. I had never been to a place like that before, filled with so many people, many of whom were trying to take advantage of you, pick your pocket, maybe even take your life. I remember staying so very close to my uncle as we walked down Canal Street. And then we made that right hand turn on to Bourbon Street. This was in 1974. A more vile and sexually laden place I could not have imagined.

Was that where Jesus went?

Or maybe Jesus wandered on to Wall Street in New York, a place where the idol of Baal still reigns. A place where the only god is wealth, where people will trade away their families, their health, nearly anything to get...more.

Or maybe Jesus wandered on to Parliament Hill, where the temptation is not as much as to speak out as to say nothing. Don't say anything that might disrupt the status quo, that might rattle the cage of the power holders. Don't look around, for then you might see the ways that our seniors are neglected, that waters are polluted, that indigenous tribes are abused again and again and again.

Don't look! Don't speak.

He was still dripping from his baptism when Jesus was confronted with his demons, like all of us. He had to decide who he was, who he would be. He had to define what it meant to be the Son of God, the Beloved.

Just like all of us!

We all have to decide. Whether we will go to the river with John. Whether we will go into the wilderness to wrestle with the demons and wild animals of our lives.

We have to choose our way. All of us.

In his book *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning And Importance of Fairy Tales*, Bruno Bettelheim explores the significance of wilderness in fairy tales. In that world it is not the desert, but the forest that is the place of danger. He writes:

*'Since ancient times the near impenetrable forest in which we get lost has symbolized the dark, hidden, near-impenetrable world of our unconscious. If we have lost the framework which gave structure to our past life and must now find our way to become ourselves, and have entered this wilderness with an as yet undeveloped personality, when we succeed in finding our way out we shall emerge with a much more highly developed humanity.'*¹

Jesus went into the wilderness of his life and emerged with a realization of what it meant for him to be human, for what it meant to be the Son of God. He came out knowing his message, his calling.

He left the wilderness and returned home, back to Galilee. Always the toughest place to be. He returned with a message that echoed the one he had heard from John, with a slight variation.

"The kingdom of God has come near." It is near. It isn't here, but it is close. Closer than you can imagine, closer than your next breath.

The kingdom of God has come near.

And what does it take to enter? Repent and believe.

Repent is the way we always hear that, but the word is *metanoia*. It means turn around. It means go another way. Repent isn't being sorry or miserable or regretting that you were mean to that classmate, or that you cut off that driver in traffic, or that you mishandled the money, or were unfaithful to your spouse. To repent is to turn our minds God-ward, to do a 180! It means aligning yourself when the taunts start to fall; it means being courteous to others as you would want them to be to you; it means being a good steward with all the gifts entrusted to us; it means being faithful to our commitments even, especially when times are hard. Repent means we choose again this day to walk in the paths of righteousness, in the path of God.

And belief in the gospel is not giving intellectual assent. It isn't even cognitive. The word is *pistus*, it means trust. It is less about what is in our head than what is in our gut. It means that since we have gotten in the boat with Jesus we will unfurl our sails to catch the Spirit's wind, and rely on God to carry us even when the storms arise.²

My former professor James Fowler said that faith, belief is where we rest our souls. In your life, where is it that you ultimately rest, allow yourself to just be, knowing that you will be held? Is it in Jesus?

¹ Justine Gaunt, 2011. <https://www.woodlands.co.uk/blog/flora-and-fauna/the-fairytale-forest-%E2%80%93-a-source-of-symbolism/#>

² C. Clifton Black. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-mark-19-15-4>

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, to John, out in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism for the forgiveness of sin.

In these days of Lent, we are invited to walk through these wilderness days, asking the question about whose message we will align? What path are we going to follow? Where will we rest our soul?

In these days Jesus comes to us saying, "The kingdom of God has come near! Repent, turn around and rest your soul in me."

Amen